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Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, questions relating to refugees, returnees and displaced persons and humanitarian questions
Human rights questions

Letter dated 9 July 1998 from the Permanent Representative of Ethiopia to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to transmit herewith a press statement by the Permanent Mission of Ethiopia to the United Nations Office at Geneva, (see annex) which was issued on 2 July 1998 in connection with the statement by the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights, on 1 July 1998.

I should be grateful if you could kindly circulate the present letter and its annex as an official document of the fifty-second session of the General Assembly under agenda items 20, 107 and 112.

(*Signed*) Duri **Mohammed**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

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Annex

Press release issued on 2 July 1998 by the Permanent Mission of Ethiopia to the United Nations Office at Geneva

The United Nations High Commissioner For Human Rights issued a very strange Statement on 1 July 1998, on the human rights of Eritreans in Ethiopia, one which has caused deep disappointment to the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

The statement of the High Commissioner criticizing Ethiopia for human rights violations against Eritrean nationals is not only absolutely groundless, but is also of the kind that would undermine the credibility of the Office of the High Commissioner.

The High Commissioner cannot be uninformed of the fact that, unlike the Eritrean Government's treatment of Ethiopians in Eritrea, whatever the Ethiopian Government has been doing with respect to Eritrean nationals in Ethiopia has been strictly within the law and in full compliance with principles of international humanitarian law and with full cognizance of and respect for the provisions of international treaties in the area of human rights.

Does the High Commissioner realize that no United Nations Agency with mandates in these areas, whether the International Committee of the Red Cross or the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, has access to Eritrea?

The High Commissioner cannot be unaware of the statement issued by the Ethiopian Government, with a covering letter dated 25 June 1998 by Ethiopia's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Office at Geneva, communicated to her and detailing the atrocities committed by the Eritrean regime against Ethiopian nationals in Eritrea. Furthermore, it would be difficult to imagine that the High Commissioner is not aware of the plight of the more than 600 Ethiopian nationals under detention in Eritrea. The fact that these Ethiopians are being tortured and are being held under inhumane and degrading conditions has indeed been communicated to the High Commissioner. So has the information with regard to the more than 4,000 Ethiopians who have been expelled from Eritrea empty-handed after their properties have been confiscated.

Is the High Commissioner not cognizant of the Eritrean air strikes against civilian centres, deliberately calculated to kill and maim children and the old? Why did the High Commissioner prefer to keep silent regarding all these, and choose to refer to dialogue in her part of the statement where the name Eritrea is mentioned?

Ethiopia does not believe in tit for tat. Therefore whatever is done by Eritrea cannot and will not justify similar action on the part of Ethiopia. Ethiopia has moral scruples. The High Commissioner cannot attribute such qualities to the Eritrean authorities. Confirmation regarding this can easily be found all over, including within the United Nations system.

The High Commissioner cannot claim that Ethiopia has not explained the rationale for the steps taken with regard to some Eritrean nationals in Ethiopia. The rationale is security considerations. In this regard, there should be absolutely no doubt on the part of the High Commissioner that it is only those Eritreans in Ethiopia who have been engaged in mobilizing funds to finance Eritrean aggression and those involved in espionage and other clandestine activities as agents of the Eritrean Government against the national security of Ethiopia that have been required to leave the country.

These measures have been taken with full respect for the safety and dignity of the individual and in full compliance with principles of international humanitarian laws.

Moreover, the Ethiopian Government is always ready to cooperate with those who wish to and have the mandate to investigate any alleged violations of principles of international humanitarian laws in Ethiopia. In contrast, the High Commissioner should know that this cannot be in Eritrea, and should therefore realize the magnitude of the crime being committed by Eritrea against Ethiopians in Eritrea in the dark and with no possibilities for monitoring.

It is in view of all these that the High Commissioner's statement becomes inexplicable and damages the credibility of her office. All the more so because the urgent request by the Ethiopian Government that the High Commissioner press upon the Eritrean Government to respect fully the rights of Ethiopians illegally detained in Eritrea remains unanswered.

Since the statement by the High Commissioner is based on so much erroneous information, it cannot be of surprise that the whole question of the Eritrean aggression against Ethiopia and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people and the resulting suffering has been beyond the grasp and understanding of the High Commissioner.

The Permanent Mission of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia to the United Nations Office at Geneva finds it tragic that the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has allowed that office to be misused and in a way that would surely undermine the credibility of the High Commissioner. Making amends is in order and this is expected by the people of Ethiopia, particularly from those Ethiopians who have been and are being tortured and inhumanely treated at the hands of the Eritrean authorities.